

“The Will of God” (Part 1)

In 1944, during the devastation of the Second World War, a prominent British preacher and author named Leslie Weatherhead preached five sermons on the will of God to his congregation in London. These talks were later published into a book simply called “The Will of God”.

Since that time, this little book has become a classic, read by millions. In my opinion, it offers one of the clearest insights into a topic that is deep and often perplexing: What is the will of God? How can we know and understand God’s will?

This is such an important subject, yet there is so much confusion and misunderstanding over it. For example, a 43 year old man is sitting at home, then suddenly complains of chest pains and shortness of breath. He is having a heart attack! Family members call 911, an ambulance crew rushes him to the hospital. He is put in the cardiac care unit. A team of doctors and medical staff work skillfully and diligently to save his life. But after 2 days, he dies. The bereaved family members say, “It was God’s will to take him.” Is it God’s will that a 43 year old man in the prime of his life dies, leaving behind a 40 year old widow, a 16 year old son and a 12 year old daughter? What about the doctors, nurses, technicians, and EMT personnel who worked to save his life? Were they bucking against the will of God in doing that? If he had lived, wouldn’t people have said: “It was God’s will that he recovered.” Can God both will that he die, and that he recover?

A young girl dreams of the day when she will marry, have children, and have a home of her own. She prays that God will send the right person into her life. But years pass, she reaches middle age, and that hope grows dimmer and dimmer, until she realizes she will probably never get married. Can we say, “It must be God’s will that she remain single” – when physically and emotionally she craves to be a wife and mother?

Dr. Weatherhead told of visiting a friend in India. The man had lost his little son in a cholera epidemic. As they talked, the friend’s little daughter, the only remaining child, slept in a cot at the far end of the veranda. Grief stricken, the father said to Dr. Weatherhead: “Well, it is the will of God. That’s all there is to it. It is the will of God.” Leslie Weatherhead knew the man well enough to give him a direct rebuttal. He said to his friend: “Suppose someone crept up the steps onto the veranda tonight, while you slept, and deliberately put a wad of cotton soaked in cholera germ culture over your little girl’s mouth. What would you think about that?” The man replied, “What would I think? Nobody would do such a thing! If he tried it and I caught him, I would kill him with as little thought as I would a snake! What do you mean by suggesting such a thing?” Dr. Weatherhead answered: “John, isn’t that what you’ve accused God of doing when you said it was his will? Call your little boy’s death the result of mass ignorance, call it mass folly, call it bad drains or communal carelessness, but don’t call it the will of God.”

So you see how confused we can be sometimes when we talk about the will of God. ***In this series of messages I hope to avoid two extremes.*** The first is to assume we can understand all there is to know about God’s intentions! We can’t. Even when we’ve done our best to interpret God’s will, there is a limit to our human understanding. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us of this: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord.” The other extreme

is to throw up our hands and say the will of God is a total mystery, and that it's just beyond our human ability to understand. The writer of the New Testament letter to the Colossians prays this prayer for believers in Colossae: "We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord" (Colossians 1:9-10a). God wants us to know His will! To have a deepening understanding of God's will is part of our maturing in Christ.

One of the most helpful parts of Weatherhead's book *The Will of God* is where he suggests we look at the will of God from three perspectives: God's *intentional* will, God's *circumstantial* will, and God's *ultimate* will. (It's not that God sees it this way, but this way of looking at it is a human tool for trying to understand it better).

The *intentional* will of God refers to God's original purpose, His ideal goal for us. But when God's intentional will is somehow blocked, His *circumstantial* will comes into play.- it is His will *within the circumstances* created. The *ultimate* will of God is God achieving His final goal and purpose in spite of our human evil, foolishness, ignorance and the like.

Let's think more today about God's *intentional will*. Whenever we think of the intentional will of God – His ideal design and purpose for us – we have to strip from our thinking all that is evil, sad, broken, chaotic. This can be hard to do! For example, insurance companies talk of "acts of God" – meaning floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.! Or, we think of Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done", and God's will being done meant that in the next 24 hours Jesus would experience a fake trial, mocking, beating, and crucifixion. So, our assumption can be, if we say, "Not my will but Yours be done", we'd better look out and prepare for the worst!

So, we need to get out of that mode of associating God's will with bad stuff! Weatherhead says, "The intentional will of God means the way in which God pours himself out in goodness, such as the true father longs to do for his son." ***God intends for life, for His creation, to be good!*** God created the world, and humans, good. He created a world in harmony with Himself. The goodness of creation is symbolized by the Garden of Eden, a paradise. In the story of creation in Genesis 1, over and over it says, "And God saw that it was good." *That is the will of God for us.*

In Matthew 18:4 Jesus says, "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." Then there are these words of Jesus in Matthew 7:7-11: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Think about this: If a little son or daughter or grandchild sat down for a

meal, would a good father or mother put a dinner plate in front of the child with rock on it, and say, "There's your dinner."? Or would a parent put a plate down with a snake on it? If we (who are evil) want to give our children good gifts, *how much more* does our heavenly Father want to give us good things!

Nancy and I have moved so many times in the last few years that we have developed a friendship with our real estate agent and her husband. This husband's emails always end with this: "Life is good." *If we could only get this straight: God's original purpose, His highest desire, His intentional will, is good!*

It is *not* God's intentional will that a 43 year old man in the prime of his life die of a heart attack and leave a bereaved wife and several young children behind. It is *not* God's intentional will that a little 4 year old die of brain cancer or be killed in an auto accident. It was *not* God's intentional will that a good man like former Phillies pitcher Roy Halliday die in his sport plane or that an airliner with 230 people on board crash into a mountain. It was *not* God's intentional will that that my neighbor Jimmy Miller was blown to bits by a grenade when he was serving as a Marine in Vietnam. When Jesus walked the dusty paths of Palestine *doing the will of His Father* He did good...He healed...He gave life and hope to people. He did not diminish or destroy life for anyone!

Perhaps we should take a minute, and check out a few objections that might be raised about what I have said. One might say, "Well, people get comfort in believing their tragedies are the will of God. One can bear almost anything if we suppose it is the will of God." A beautiful little girl who sings in the children's choir at her church one day runs out into the street to retrieve a ball and is run over by a car. Her grief-stricken parents say, "God chose to take her because He needed her to sing with other children in heaven." That's easier to live with than saying God didn't want her to die – it was just a tragic mistake and accident. But God doesn't delight in precious little children being run over by cars. Dr. Weatherhead raised the objection I am speaking about, then answered it: "Admittedly there is a time when things can be said and there is a time when they cannot be said, however true they may be. If you are standing in the presence of some great tragedy, there is very little you can say about the will of God. But I would go on immediately to add this: There is never any final comfort in a lie...he who hides in an idea about God which is not true, will in the hour of real need, be left as comfortless as atheism would leave him...to face the truth is costly, and people hate to be made to think, but only the truth can set us free."

A second objection might be this: "OK, you want to speak of the will of God in terms of all the good, joyful, healthy, lovely things that happen. But what about those who suffer greatly and become more noble and better persons because of it. Didn't God will this, then, so they could grow and be an example to others?" Not really. We'll deal with this more when we talk about God's circumstantial will next week. But let's be truthful here: There are many people who suffer and *do not* become better persons, or become shining examples of faith and courage, as a result. Many individuals suffer and become bitter, not better. They complain about their fate. They remain angry at God, mad at the world, soured on life. Tragedy and suffering *may* bring

out in a person courage and faith and a conquering spirit, but God doesn't need evil and suffering to create good! If that were so, when Jesus went around healing people and relieving suffering, He was *hindering God's will* – He was depriving people of a chance to grow! God doesn't need bad things to happen just so we can be better people!

Some of us will have come a long way if we can just begin to associate with the phrase “the will of God” all that is good..... lovely..... beautiful..... healthy..... joyful.

When a proud father and mother look down on their newborn baby and thrill to the miracle of life – that's the will of God - not when a baby is burned to death in a blazing house fire.

When a healthy and emotionally sound young man or woman chooses to dedicate themselves to Jesus and to the service of others in His name, that's the will of God – not when a young man or woman is hospitalized or institutionalized with a mental disorder or illness.

When people are moved with compassion to share in a hunger drive and as a result feed hungry people in their town or send food to places like Ethiopia or Sudan, that's the will of God – not when hundreds in a village are killed by an earthquake or flood.

Let me close with a quote from Dr. Weatherhead: “When you see (God's) glory reflected in this lovely earth, in nature around us so full of his beauty, in poem and song, in picture, in music, in great architecture, and in lowly service, in the lives of lovely people, in the happiness of a home, in the health of the body, and the resilience of the mind, and the saintliness of the soul, then looking up to your Father in heaven, say, ‘Thy will be done’; and let us do dedicate ourselves that we may be made one in the glorious harmony of all things and all people who carry out his will, that it may be done in earth as the angels do it in heaven.” And I say, “Amen.”

In my next message in this series, I want us to consider God's *circumstantial* will - God's will *within our circumstances*, when His intentional will is blocked.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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